

## Reducing CO2: Vietnam stands at the forefront

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*VietNamNet Bridge – On the occasion of an international conference on “Payments for Environmental Services and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” (REDD) in Hanoi from June 23-24, VietNamNet would like to introduce an article by Charlotte Streck, a renowned environmentalist, about Vietnam’s active participation in REDD.*



Vietnam is among countries which are experienced in afforestation.

Developing and developed countries that attended the December 2009 United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen expressed strong commitment for a mechanism that creates incentives for the reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, for conservation, sustainable forest management and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks (REDD+). While a technical REDD+ decision was adopted in Copenhagen, the REDD+ decision that would have provided guidance on the incentive framework and finance fell victim to the lack of agreement on the broader negotiation package. However, despite the overall sobering outcome of the climate summit, REDD+ was supported by broad consensus among parties. REDD+ figures prominently in the Copenhagen Accord, the informal outcome of the climate summit. In addition, developed countries have pledged USD3.5 billion of “fast-track” REDD+ financing.

Vietnam actively participates in the international climate negotiations and stands at the forefront of pioneering REDD+ implementation. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung adopted the National Target Program for climate change in December 2008. The Program is already under implementation and Vietnam leading the way for neighboring countries such as Laos or Cambodia. In the forestry, Vietnam is one of the few countries that participates both in the REDD+ readiness process supported World Bank Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and the UN REDD program; in addition the country has expressed interest of participating in the EU’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade Action.

Vietnam’s proactive forest policy is not new. The country has pioneered afforestation schemes and payment for ecosystem service programs (PES) for the last twenty years. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Vietnam has successfully reforested about 4 million hectares and regained about 40% of its original forest cover. Deforestation rates of primary forests have decreased 77.9% since the close of the 1990s. Vietnam is one of the few countries which have rich experience in the implementing performance based reforestation programs.

Internationally, Vietnam’s success in reversing deforestation trends and its ambitious afforestation program provide an interesting case study for the implementation of the “plus” component of REDD+, namely the support of

sustainable forest management and the enhancement of forest areas. Vietnam jointly with Costa Rica will be one of the first countries engaging in the REDD+ readiness process whose forest sector is a net sink of emissions. Vietnam may be the first country to propose reference level that would credit primarily emission removals from afforestation rather than emission reductions from deforestation

When it comes to national implementation, REDD+ provides an opportunity for Vietnam to show-case the success and lessons learned from the implementation of the 5 Million Hectare Reforestation Program (Program 661). The participation in REDD+ may help Vietnam to expand but also to reform, fine-tune and improve Program 661 that has been under implementation since 1998. With additional funds, the Program 661 could extend its coverage to the protection of existing forest areas, particular natural forest. Further and targeted support of plantations would help remove pressure from the remaining natural forest areas. Linking the 661 Program to REDD+ may also help to support the monitoring of the program and applying a stricter performance based approach towards the program payments. International resources made available through a REDD+ mechanism could also provide important new funds for targeted capacity building and strengthening of local levels of governments.

Even as forest cover has increased, declining forest quality and continued degradation remains a problem in Vietnam's forest sector, in particular as degradation is most rampant in forests with highest carbon densities. The development of community forest programs for combating degradation by providing long-term financial incentives to engage in sustainable forestry practice has been identified as REDD+ strategy for Vietnam. Community forest schemes could also serve as international examples for benefit sharing from REDD+. In Vietnam's Central Highlands which show particularly high rates of degradation community management schemes can provide important development opportunities for rural poor and ethnic minority groups.

Vietnam's Forest Protection and Development Funds (FPDFs) have been identified as potential candidates for the national management and disbursement of REDD+ finance. The FPDFs exist at the national and subnational level and fall outside the regular socio-economic development planning and budgeting process, as they are conceived as a novel public-private partnership. The objective of the funds is to mobilize resources for the protection of remaining forests, to engage local stakeholders in forest management and protection, and to enhance the efficiency in forest management. The FPDFs with their decentralized structure could administer REDD+ programs that make payments or distribute non-cash benefits to rural communities by involving the relevant Forest Management Boards. A provincial Fund for Forest Protection and Development is currently being piloted as part of an ongoing PES pilot project in Dong Nai river basin in La Dong province.

Implementing REDD+ in Vietnam is however not without challenges. Effective REDD+ implementation requires a radical shift in the way the remaining natural forests are managed with a perspective of long-term sustainable management. The adoption of a REDD+ strategy at the national level will have to be supported by an effective implementation framework that ensures sufficient information and guidance for local governments and forest managers concerning their rights and responsibilities, and addresses discrepancies between national and local policies. The sustainability of any REDD+ program, even after international incentive payments have been phased out, will depend on the provision of development opportunities for local communities that do not lead to further forest degradation. A sustainable land-management program will almost certainly have to be supported by a stable system of land tenure and community rights. While Vietnam's functioning administration, social stability, and relatively high degree of tenure security give the country a competitive edge in a future international REDD+ regime, REDD+ would have to be supported by a cabinet-level effort and the coordinated deployment of resources and technical assistance to all levels of government and society.

Existing experience combined with early engagement in the REDD+ process put Vietnam in the role of a regional leader on REDD+. Establishing reference levels that take into account the net increase in forest coverage while providing effective incentives for decreasing further forest degradation and loss of natural forest will help pioneering REDD+ at the international level. The available fast-track funding for REDD+ will help to cover REDD+ readiness and some of the early implementation costs for REDD+. Future payments will however be performance based and depend on the overall success of the implementation of REDD+ policies in the country. Such success will have to be based on an ambitious effort to create incentives at the local level to protect forests and enhance forest cover further. Vietnam has taken first steps into that direction; it is up to the international community to support the country in these efforts.